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The Disney Evolution: Princesses as Positive Role Models

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The Disney Evolution: Princesses as Positive Role Models



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

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April 2014

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Abstract

The Disney Corporation has strategically captivated the attention of audiences worldwide with their iconic animated motion pictures and, as a result, has an impact on children in most nations. Due to their iconic popularity, these works have been discussed and analyzed in great detail by many scholars. Many have criticized the films for their seemingly sexist and oppressive gender messages and find fault with the princesses serving as role models for young girls; they argue that oppressive characteristics and ideas are presented. However, when one closely examines the films and compares the characteristics of the princesses to the progressive female of their time, one may clearly see positive messages. Moreover, interactions between the female protagonists and animals in the stories showcase the princesses' progressive qualities and highlight the ways in which these individuals may be seen as reputable women who set a worthy example for young girls. In fact, one may argue that these women are model citizens of their respective time periods who advocate for gender equality, while promoting healthy, functional relationships and pursuing happiness.

Dedication

To my parents, Donald and Debra Lueke, and my siblings, Madeline, Rebecca, Eleanor, Nathaniel, Michael, and William who are my greatest sources of strength and support. Thank you for making my life truly magical.



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Introduction

The Disney princess films are some of the most popular in the world today as they have been translated into several different languages with a fan base sprawling across the globe. The Disney Entertainment Corporation has strategically reached families worldwide and, as a result, has an impact on children in most countries. Because of their iconic popularity, these works have been discussed and analyzed in great detail by many scholars. Many have criticized the films for their seemingly sexist and oppressive gender messages and find fault with the princesses serving as role models for young girls; they argue that oppressive characteristics and ideas are presented in the popular Disney films. They see these works as roadblocks to gender equality and advocate for awareness of their stance. However, when one closely examines the films and compares the characteristics of the princesses to the progressive female of their time, one may clearly see the positive messages. Moreover, interactions between the female protagonists and animals in the stories showcase the princesses' positive characteristics and highlight the ways in which these individuals may be seen as reputable women who set a worthy example for young girls. In fact, one may argue that these women are model citizens of their respective time periods who advocate for equality, while promoting healthy, functional relationships and pursuing happiness.

The popularity of the Disney films has made the corporation not only successful but also the target of negative criticism. Many scholars believe that the Disney films represent stereotypical gender roles that serve as a poor standard for young women to aspire. They argue that the oppressive nature of these works sets unrealistic and unhealthy ideals for young girls by promoting gender inequality and poor self-image. For

example, Mia Adessa Towbin, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund, and Litsa Renée Tanner argue that in the media, including Disney films, women are oftentimes portrayed as the weaker sex who are swept off their feet by abusive, male dominant figures. Other critics explore the seemingly innovative roles of women in the films and argue that, despite the façade of empowerment and strength, these characters simply reinforce and promote different forms of oppression that are still negative and serve as terrible role models for young children.¹ The Disney Corporation, including the film division, have been criticized heavily over the years. Because the Disney name is easily recognizable, with that recognition comes a double edged sword that brings about both positive and negative attention from critics worldwide. In the article, “The Disadvantage of a Good Reputation: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims,” authors Joel Best and Kathleen S. Lowney explore this dichotomy and point out how “progressive critics argue that, [the] “decent” content...deserves criticism, in that its messages promote a hegemonic, uncritical acceptance of traditional values, so that children exposed to Disney learn to accept capitalism, racism, sexism, and so on,” (Best and Lowney). These critics view the women in the film as helpless, passive victims to society's injustices. They find much trouble with the seemingly traditional roles that the Disney princesses represent and see their role or influence as a negative one for children. These progressive individuals argue for female empowerment and equality and feel as if these ideas are underrepresented, if showcased at all, in the Disney productions.

Many scholars have attempted to address this negative presence in their criticism. Marc Choueiti et al., in an article that discusses G rated films, concludes “the traditional roles and responsibilities were still prevalent for females. Women were nearly twice as

¹ See Jule, Orr

likely (66.3% vs. 34.6%) to be parents or in a committed romantic relationship (females=60.7%, males= 31.9%). This result illustrates that a sexual double standard for males and females was alive and well in G-rated content,” (783). The study specifically focused on Disney films in one section and argues that the Disney message is that women are helpless and need to be saved by men.

However, other scholars take a different approach and find the films to be a positive source of empowerment. Some argue that the newer Disney films showcase weaker men, which in turn provides acceptance for children to show vulnerability and to not always be perfect. Ken Gillam and Sharron Wooden, for example, study how the Disney Corporation has attempted to flip the gender norms by pointing out the weaknesses of men (2). This practice encourages personal expression and discovery or development as this opens the door for the chronicling of male struggles and triumphs. This also cultivates a more understanding and supportive environment for boys to grow up in as they are not expected to only be strong, knights in shining armor who come to save the day; they too are allowed personal expression, struggle, and roadblocks on their way to ultimate success.

Author Lisa Brocklebank discusses many of the issues she has with the films in her article, “Disney's 'Mulan'—the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?”. In this piece she comments on the oppressive characteristics shown in traditional films like Cinderella and Snow White. She notes how the pieces appear to have evolved over time but argues that this could simply be the result of a different form of oppression and gender role breakdown. Other critics argue that each princess actually serves as a progressive

representation of the women of their respective periods². I extend this argument by looking at the female characters and their interactions with their animal counterparts. I argue that each princess's positive characteristics are showcased through her relationship with the animals in the films and also within the characterization of the animals themselves. Many psychologists argue that there is a link between humans and their animal counterparts and discuss the innate friendship that many individuals have with their pets. For example, scholar Cynthia Townley states, "To some people, it is simply obvious that friendship with an animal is a full, even supreme, manifestation of everything friendship needs to be. Looking at actual relationships, it is hard to deny that the relationship to a non-human companion is the (equal) strongest connection in the lives of some humans, temporarily or permanently," (45). The phrase "strongest connection" clearly emphasizes the importance of this relationship for many individuals. The close proximity and bond of these relationships is essential in understanding the logical link I propose. Animals serve as a source of support, comfort and solace for their owners. In the same manner, the cartoon animal counterparts operate as friends to the princesses who serve as an extension of each respective woman's characterization. Interestingly, as in any friendship, the animals also encourage the princesses to better themselves and their conditions while challenging them to be the best versions of themselves. They do this while offering assistance and encouragement along the way. The unique relationships between the princesses and their animal counterparts is similar to those found in human experiences, and because of this link, I contend that the princess characters can be seen in a progressive and positive manner when considering their animal counterparts. This is further iterated by the anthropomorphism of the creatures so

that they clearly appear to physically, emotionally, and intellectually mirror the actions and agency of each princess.

Interestingly, the relationship between the princesses and their animal counterparts has not been studied in great detail and largely overlooked, particularly in regards to the animals operating as an extension of the princesses' characterization. Criticism of Disney films tends to look at the animals only in specific situations such as viewing the film, *Beauty and the Beast*, from a Gothic perspective³. I am offering this paper as an early attempt to unpack and study this essential yet oftentimes overlooked link that makes these films positive role models for young women.

Early Works (1930s-1950s)

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

Walt Disney's first animated princess classic, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is one of the most recognizable and adored Disney films. Initially, the film appears to be merely the tale of a young woman who is ordered to be killed due to her extreme beauty. Once the huntsman attempts to complete his task, he is overcome by her appearance and is unable to terminate the life of such a beautiful young woman. Alone, Snow White runs off into the forest where she makes friends, lives with dwarfs and then is eventually saved by a prince. On the surface, the basic plot line seems to reinforce negative messages regarding the role of women; yet focusing on her relationship with the animals reveals more depth to the piece. In looking at her interactions with the creatures, Snow White clearly exemplifies many characteristics of an influential woman of the late 1930s.

³ See Swan

In the film, the princess is closest to the friendly and approachable animals. These creatures accompany Snow White throughout the entire piece and are the only active members of the work who rarely leave her side. The deer, birds, turtles, and other forest friends consistently advocate for the princess while working for betterment of her situation. They are soft, fluffy, approachable, and hardworking, sharing many of Snow White's characteristics. These animals are very timid and shy and initially untrusting when meeting strangers; however, once they warm up to an individual they are playful, sweet, and loyal. This is clearly seen with the seven dwarfs. When the animals first come in contact with them they are fearful and very protective of their princess. However, over time, they warm up to the little men and all live harmoniously. Snow White is similar to these creatures in that she too is initially wary of strangers but her pitfall is her trusting and kind hearted nature. This is clearly seen in the opening scenes of the work when she is singing and exuding joy while she completes her outdoor tasks. When she hears or sees the strange man (the prince) nearing, she initially hides and then cautiously warms up to the idea of interacting with him.

While Snow White may come across as a passive, quiet woman who allows men to run her life, she also possesses many qualities that make her a strong individual who is capable of self-determination. Snow White is abandoned in the woods and forced to fight for her survival. Unable to return to civilization for fear of losing her life, the princess knows she must be resourceful and instantly begins to advocate for herself. She finds the dwarfs' cottage and uses her domestic skills to help the men and establish a refuge site. Immediately, she concludes that her skills are needed and would be helpful in their home and acts. The princess explores the home, organizes their belongings, and contributes her

all. She is a fighter who knows she must act to achieve success. These attributes are further demonstrated through the presence of the animals in the piece.

The deer in the work have soft, warm eyes that are similar in shape to the princess's. They move gracefully through the forest and walk with almost a bounce in their steps. The same characteristics are seen in Snow White as she elegantly floats across the land while walking, has beautiful, welcoming facial features, and is seen as a friendly creature. The birds have a high pitched chip that mirrors the tone of Snow White's voice, and the miscellaneous other animals share her naivety in many situations, especially in regard to uncomfortable or foreign circumstances. This is clearly seen in the way the animals initially approach the cottage. Like Snow White, they are timid and slightly hesitant to enter the building. Once inside, the group shares confusion as they attempt to discover the inhabitants of the small, dirty home.

Snow White is kind, compassionate, and works to protect and take care of the dwarfs. She serves as a positive role model who makes the best out of any situation. This is seen in one of the most memorable and popular scenes from the film when Snow White is seen cleaning the cottage with the assistance of the animals. In this moment, she is doing undesirable and frustrating work in the eyes of many viewers, yet makes light of the situation by finding the silver lining in her situation. She understands her complete rejection from the kingdom and better her position by establishing a role within the cottage. With the animals' assistance, she keeps the mood light and quickly yet efficiently finishes all the household chores. This is important as it signifies that Snow White refuses to become a victim to her situation. Yes, she was almost murdered and forced to leave her life behind, but she refuses to let her traumatic experiences define her

and instead monopolizes the situation to build relationships and improve her situation. She instantly decides to take matters into her own hands and create a future for herself.

The fact that Snow White completes domestic work may initially seem problematic as she is working primarily within the private sphere. However, considering that housework was incredibly common for women of the period, she simply is seen as relatable in her occupation. Yes, she primarily takes care of traditional tasks but she has a self-starting attitude and work ethic that is admirable and progressive in nature. The animals also share her enthusiasm for household work and share her work ethic. Their eyes mimic those of the princess and one can clearly draw a link between the two parties. The animals share in her love and compassion for the dwarfs and also advocate for the betterment of the princesses situation when the evil queen attempts to kill the young woman. The princess is extremely capable and her household abilities are top-notch; Snow White will successfully manage and create a positive environment.

Due to the era in which the film was made, many of the ideas in this piece may be seen as repressive or in support of a male-dominated society. However, one must also consider that the evil queen is a woman and that she is in a position of ultimate power. Women typically did not hold positions of power in the public sphere and this presence is remarkable, despite the negative connotations associated, and makes a statement about how women in fact can hold positions of power. Also, in the 1930s, Snow White's positive, hardworking spirit would have been seen as extremely inspirational and even somewhat progressive for this period of time. She picks herself up when times get tough and makes the best of her personal situation. Her perseverance and willingness to work to find a place for survival make her admirable and strong. *Snow White*, the tale of a

beautiful and kind hearted princess may at first appear to be a dated and passive representation of women. However, upon closer examination, progressive tendencies may easily be derived from the princess's characterization. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario

Rebecca-Anne C. makes this observation stating, "Under the peasant costume, Snow White is a 1920's/30's starlet with a flapper haircut, rosebud mouth, and high-pitched warble. She matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in a time of high unemployment and poverty until she is found once again by her prince," (38). The flapper was the modern woman of the roaring 20's who was on the cutting edge of fashion, embraced a free spirited life, and dared push gender role stereotypes through daring costume selections and general social etiquette. The fact that the physical characteristics of Snow White resemble those of one of the more modern women of the period gives the impression of gradual and progressive change. Yes, she still fills many of the stereotypical attributes of repressed women, but she also is a clear and important representation of strength and independence. Her hardworking attitude, self-starting drive, and willingness to see the best in any situation resemble that of a woman attempting to navigate and survive the Great Depression. Because Snow White possesses all of these characteristics it easily may be concluded that she in fact advocates for gender equality and freedom as she is a cutting edge representation of a woman of her time.

Cinderella (1950)

Another famously notable and recognizable Disney work, *Cinderella* chronicles the tale of a wealthy young girl who lives with her father. Within the early moments of

the piece, he remarries an unfortunate woman with two daughters who are entitled and dislike Cinderella. After her father dies, she is forced to become a servant in her own home and is forced to live a secluded and depressing life of servitude to her step-family.

Some may argue the previously highlighted position regarding oppressive and traditional gender roles, as previously outlined by Choueiti, is exemplified in the film *Cinderella*. After Cinderella's father dies, she is left to the mercy of her evil step mother and the only way she is able to escape the abuses of her home life is to rely on the mystical assistance of the fairy godmother so that she may attend the ball and fall in love with the Prince. In this instance, the viewer clearly can see how the men wield all the strength and power. The evil stepmother gets her financial power and support from her late husband and Cinderella is only relieved of her abusive situation when the Prince swoops in and sweeps her off of her feet. However, I argue that because of her consistent positivity and relationship with her animal counterparts, she actually is a positive role model that defies negative criticism.

In the film, the animals with which Cinderella identifies the most are the mice. The mice inhabiting her family estate are quirky, spirited, restless creatures who want what is best for kind individuals. They advocate for Cinderella and try to make the best out of every situation. These spirited creatures are loyal yet feisty as they continuously provoke their enemies. They fight for what is right and are not afraid to stand up for what they believe in. These small animals are mean to Lucifer (the family cat) who is worshiped by the step family and stand up for Cinderella when she fails to advocate for herself. Cinderella, like the mice, is a kind hearted individual who looks for the best in

every situation. She knows what is right and lives the life of a centered and focused individual. Despite her condition she stays cheerful and positive.

The mice represent the person the Cinderella longs to become. These creatures are active and create change while altering outcomes. This is clearly seen when Cinderella does not have a dress to attend the ball. The mice, discouraged and dissatisfied with the current situation, come together, along with the birds, to make a beautiful gown. Despite their lack of resources, they look around the home and find numerous materials and objects possible to make her dream dress a reality. The mice represent Cinderella's innermost strength and courage; while the princess is completing her chores, her animal companions vigorously work to complete the gown. These creatures overcome the obstacles and restraints placed by the step family, combatting their oppression, and make opportune situations possible. They may be small and seem powerless (like Cinderella) but they have the capability and the power to make wonderful things happen as they produce a beautiful gown using discarded items. Throughout the scene, the mice and other creatures are upbeat and fully engaged in their project. We see a similar attitude in Cinderella as she maintains a positive demeanor despite her bleak situation. This is clearly seen when she is singing and keeping a positive attitude when feeding the farm animals and finding pleasure in her seemingly mundane household tasks. Throughout the film, these creatures share several of the same characteristics as Cinderella in that they are spirited, hardworking, and motivated individuals who advocate for the success of the princess.

The mice are a prime example of anthropomorphized creatures as these individuals take on the mannerisms of Cinderella and operate as an extension of her

characterization. The princess's furry friends wear clothing, speak broken English, and act in the same manner as young children. They are shown to have impulsive behaviors, fierce loyalty, kind hearts, and a strong work ethic. The most notable and outspoken, Gus and Jacques, form close bonds with Cinderella and are oftentimes seen assisting her with day to day tasks. At the end of the film, these mice, along with the other animals in the manor, are responsible for helping Cinderella escape from her attic room so that she may try on the glass slipper and eventually is united with the prince. Another clear link to the humanistic tendencies in the animals may be seen in one of the most magical parts of the film. At one point, the fairy godmother arrives and turns several of the creatures and inanimate objects into humans, horses, and a carriage to sweep Cinderella off to the ball. In this instance, the animals are literally transformed into the people that they most closely resemble, highlighting the intentional link between the animals and the humans in the piece.

As previously stated, the animals mimic human characteristics and reinforce the mannerisms and ideas associated with certain characters. The animals that befriend Cinderella have a happy and positive demeanor that is intentional. The mice, birds, dog, and farm animals are cheerful, friendly, lively and spirited beings that bring joy and happiness to the scenes. Whenever one of these beings is on the screen, the mood is lifted as they are the result of a powerfully positive energy. The mice all have delightful, miniature costumes, are seen dancing with large smiles, and are all always working together harmoniously on the screen, mimicking Cinderella. Due to the striking resemblance in characteristics, these creatures are clearly an extension of Cinderella's personality. They also are all a warm, soft light brown color. They are not harshly shaped

or intimidating to look at; instead, the mice are cheerful little fur balls that dance across the ground. This energy and optimistic spirit is then linked back to Cinderella, which may cause the viewer to have positive feelings and emotional ties with her. The creatures want Cinderella be successful. Many may identify with the emotional tie Cinderella has to her furry friends and they see the kind actions she does for them. For example, when Cinderella releases Gus Gus from the cat Lucifer's trap, she also finds clothing and friends for the new mouse. This promotes compassion and respect as worthy attributes. Cinderella provides for those around and maintains a caring and nurturing environment. Her extreme kindness evokes a strong level of pathos within the audience while building a strong image on the screen.

The one evil animal, the cat, Lucifer, aptly, the same name as the demonic angel in the Bible, is identified with the evil step-sisters and the step mother. They dote on him, and his behaviors and mannerisms mirror those of the evil step family. He is colored dark black and dirty grey with greenish eyes. Interestingly, his coloring mirrors that of the evil step family in that his dark coloring and green eyes are the same as the evil step mother and step sisters. His appearance in and of itself is negative. The harsh coloring makes him stand out and seem unapproachable and his long thin eyes are terrifying and uncomfortable to confront. The hues on his body give off an aggressive and threatening vibe. Pointy white teeth that seem powerful and dangerous are another key characteristic of this creature. He is conniving, spiteful, hurtful, and like any cat, ultimately hunts the mice. Lucifer, like his owners, enjoys making more work and misery for Cinderella; this is clearly seen when he purposefully tracks dust and dirt all over the floor that she just finished scrubbing. This spiteful behavior mirrors the actions of the evil step-family in

the scene right before the ball. When the step family sees Cinderella's new dress, they notice all the parts of it that required the use of their hand-me down items and physically destroy it by pulling apart the gown to gain access to their pieces. Physically, they are destroying and degrading the princess in a savage and violent manner. This moment of hatred and evil energy mirrors that of Lucifer, the cat. His character evokes hatred and spiteful energy toward not only himself but also toward the evil step family as he is closely tied to them and reflects their attitudes and ideas. The fact that Lucifer serves as an extension of the step-family's characterization magnifies how the mice and other creatures serve as an extension of Cinderella's characterization.

The female protagonist in this work is relatable as, along her journey, she experiences sadness and disappointment. She is put down by her family, forced to work as a slave in her family home, and seems as if she is unable to attend the ball. At times, we see the princess feeling defeated, frustrated, and desiring to give up. One of the most famous scenes in which the viewer sees her in a vulnerable state is after her gown is destroyed by the step-family and she is crying on the bench feeling helpless, lonely, and defeated. She is portrayed lying across the seat, wailing, with sad soft music in the background. In this scene, the animals closest to the princess share her emotions and also seem distraught by Cinderella's situation. Interestingly, the individual who arrives to assist and "save" Cinderella in this moment is the fairy godmother. This is remarkable because in this instance, a woman is arriving to assist and save another woman. The strong and capable individual in this situation is a female; however, it is important to note that she is capable of magic, and that there are limitations to her powers.

In the 1950s, Cinderella would be seen as a strong and positive role model for women due to her positive demeanor and work ethic. She overcomes the abusive challenges presented by her family and, because she never gives up, ultimately achieves success. The majority of middle class women at this time period were homemakers living “the American Dream” and this image of femininity may have been inspiring in that it provided the picture of a resilient individual for those who may have a less than ideal home life.

Cinderella may not seem like much of an advancement considering Snow White and the thirteen years between their releases. However, DoRozario argues that:

The transitions on the timeline between the generations of Disney women are not, however, simple, but complex rites of passage, with power wrestled from one generation to the next not through nurturing familial bonds but through socially constructed relationships; stepmothers and fairy godmothers not mothers and grandmothers. The emphasis is not on the ties of blood but on the social covenants between women. (40-41)

These relationships are not always clearly evident but may be traced when one studies the gradual acquisition of power and control by women for women in these works. The process is complicated and gradual, which is crucial as it points to the increase in women’s gender equality over time. The women in these films have nothing handed to them; instead they must work-work to be taken seriously, work to be considered an equal in society, and work to forge the paths that lead them to their destinies.

Evidence of the princesses’ strong work ethic is seen in both of these films and is one of the fundamental aspects of their empowerment. This is also represented in their

animal counterparts. Cinderella and the mice work both physically and mentally to help Cinderella reach ultimate success. Yes, some may argue that because she is saved by a prince she is the typical “damsel in distress.” However, one may argue that her hard work, dedication, and the assistance of the fairy godmother is actually what is responsible for her “rescuing.” Cinderella and her animal friends accomplished mundane household tasks, keeping busy daily to stay alert and alive in an abusive environment. They worked to stay occupied, and avoid depression despite their bleak circumstances. The animals’ cheerful demeanor reflects that of their human counterpart. Because these creatures are an extension of the princess’s characterization, one may conclude that their actions are representative of Cinderella.

Middle Works (1990s-2000)

From the 1970s through the late 80s, very few Disney films contained princess themes and stood the test of time to be considered a classic or recognizable by current audiences. Because of this, I have chosen not to include works from this short period of time as they are not pertinent to my argument. However, in the early 1990s, several films featuring princesses as the primary protagonists premiered. These pieces contain slightly more progressive individuals than the earlier films that captivated audiences. These works, like their predecessors, contain positive role models for young women.

Pocahontas (1995)

Walt Disney’s interpretation of the classic romanticized tale of Pocahontas is typically seen as a traditional contribution to the princess collection. In 1995, the Disney Corporation produced this complex work that is still popular with audiences. The story

follows the tale of the Native American princess, Pocahontas, as she navigates her father's expectations and her desire to create and follow her own destiny. The work chronicles her tribe's interactions with the English settlers, including her love story with John Smith, the bumpy collision of the two cultures, and her ultimate decision to stay in North America to fulfill her traditionally appointed duty and support her tribe. Litsa Renee Tanner et al. discusses the princess and states "In many ways Pocahontas is portrayed as a strong female character; however, at the end of the film, she follows a stereotypic female script," (24). In this instance, Tanner et al. is sharing a position on the choice that Pocahontas makes in the film to stay and work with her family suggesting this is an oppressive or stereotypical choice. However, I argue that in this moment she actually is placing the needs and wants of those around her above her romantic ideas making this actually the more progressive and practical choice for an empowered and important individual.

The relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith reveals much about her characterization as she is very candid and straight forward in their interactions. This is clearly seen after John Smith offends Pocahontas by calling her people savages. Instead of taking such an insult, she logically contradicts his opinion and points out how he could be the savage one due to his lack of awareness and knowledge of the land. In this instance, despite the traditional gendered power dynamic, we see the princess combat the ignorance of a strong masculine character. By proving herself as an equal and rarely hesitating from a conflict with a male leader, she exerts herself as an opinionated and passionate woman who feels as if she should have the ability to follow her own dreams.

Pocahontas is a free spirited individual who is very in touch with her surroundings. Oftentimes in the work, she moves in an almost animalistic manner, giving the impression that her soul is united with the creatures. This is evident in the film when she is moving around the waterfall, following John Smith and when she goes to visit Grandmother Willow, the wise old talking tree. She quietly and carefully manages the landscape, in the same way an animal may while attempting to hide in the brush. She develops an intimate relationship with all the elements of the wild, including the animals. She is oftentimes seen interacting with the creatures of the forest and is always accompanied by two significant animals, Meeko, her pet raccoon, and Flit, her hummingbird.

Meeko, Pocahontas's raccoon companion, is a curious and loveable creature that accompanies the princess in nearly every scene. He is stubborn, cautious and reflects the innermost thoughts of the female protagonist throughout the work. Meeko is very protective and advocates for Pocahontas. He is opinionated and works to help her become a better version of herself at all times. This is clearly seen when he initially has her best interest at heart and discourages her from contacting John Smith. This model is a respectable role for girls and women as in this situation we see an empowered yet logical understanding of the situations presented by Meeko.

The hummingbird that accompanies Pocahontas throughout the piece, Flint, is a stubborn creature that is flighty and easily upset. This closely mirrors the attitude held by the princess as she too shares the emotions expressed by this little creature at different instances throughout the piece. Like Flint, Pocahontas is opinionated, driven, and stubborn. She knows what she wants and is willing to fight for what she believes is right.

The princess is not content consistently staying in one place; she is always searching for her path or the next adventure. Similarly, Flint is always hovering, waiting for the next adventure or movement. This behavior is exemplified when the princess is seen singing about which path she should take as she wonders what is around the river bend.

Pocahontas encourages and promotes peace, harmony, and unity. She is a non-judgmental individual who, despite being labeled as naive and incapable, challenges the notions that the English and the members of her own tribe possess. She serves as a peaceful negotiator between the colonists and her tribe and is responsible for saving the life of her love interest, Captain John Smith. However, at the end of the film, she takes on the typical female role of caretaker and stays in America to help care for her tribe and her home instead of going back to England with John Smith. This instance may be perceived in both ways—positive in that she is staying true to herself despite being in love with a man, and negative as she is held back due to her duty and role as a woman in a traditional Native American tribe.

Some may view the conclusion of the film and Pocahontas's decision to stay in North America as a repressive message; however, in reality, this is an instance of extreme empowerment and pride. Pocahontas chooses her duty to her father, her people, and her territory, over a romantic relationship that would require her to leave her family and roots behind. In this moment, the princess is choosing to stay in her home to hold an authoritative and important role in the tribe dynamic. The viewer sees Pocahontas making a selfless and logical decision that will most likely benefit the majority. She is financially and socially stable in North America and has her own life and identity with her tribe. If Pocahontas chose to return to England, she would be viewed as a second class citizen

who would be forced to compromise her identity, conforming to Western cultural expectations.

Interestingly, when one considers Pocahontas in comparison to the women of the early 1990s, she is representative of the working mother attempting to balance a career and her family, ultimately on a quest to “have it all.” Her difficult choice to choose her family and duty over love highlights the challenges of this situation. Pocahontas fails to successfully balance a romantic relationship and a career, or her duty to the tribe, arguing how incredibly challenging it was to balance obligations for women in the early 1990s. Pocahontas desires success, personally, emotionally, and spiritually. She strives to do what is right and balance her love life with her responsibilities and obligation to her tribe. At the end of the piece, like many women in the 1990s, she makes the difficult decision to stay in North America with her tribe and pursue her version of a career, sacrificing her romantic wants for family obligations.

Mulan (1998)

Mulan chronicles the tale of a young woman in ancient China who fails to fit the traditional mold of a petite, well-behaved young woman who is content with an arranged marriage. She consistently fails her family and struggles to conform to the traditional ideals desired for a woman of this film’s period. Unlike the perfect woman, she is outspoken, driven, masculine, and willing to take chances. Continually, she fails to protect the family’s reputation and much emphasis is placed on her dishonoring behaviors and attitude. She articulates her opinion in the public male sphere and is defiant in her failure to withhold her thoughts and comments around the family table. As the film progresses, we see Mulan risk her life to fight in the emperor’s army, in place of her

disabled father, an incredibly risky and dangerous idea considering her position as a female. As the work progresses, she becomes an essential member of the military and eventually saves the empire with her quick intelligence and perseverance in face of adversity.

Lisa Brocklebank's article on *Mulan* focuses on the idea of a "cross-dressing" heroine and argues the possibilities that this key element brings to her character. Brocklebank explores the several different ways of looking at the key pieces of Mulan's character construction and points out the influence her society has on the way she is perceived in the film. Mulan, aware of the constraints presented by her culture, capitalizes on her resources to assist her family by taking on a "masculine" role and serving in the emperor's army in the place of her father. In this instance I argue that Mulan, the woman, is stronger and more capable than her father, the man, and takes it upon herself to do whatever she must to protect him and her family's name. Even though Mulan must hide her gender, her strength is emphasized in the risks she takes as a woman donning the appearance and societal role of a man.

Mulan is only character in the film that interacts with multiple as she primarily spends her time with the dragon, Mushu, the "lucky" cricket, and her horse. These three animals all play an interesting part in her characterization and development throughout the film. Acting as an extension of her character, these creatures are anthropomorphized in a deliberate manner that showcases the depths of Mulan.

Mushu, the dragon, like Mulan, is seen as simply a mistake. He failed at protecting a previous ancestor and because of that error, is seen as a pawn by the powerful and ancient family protectors. He desires to be seen as a powerful and valid

force, but instead is only laughed at whenever he attempts to do something of importance or value. He is not trusted or utilized for his strengths, instead, only for the simple tasks that he is capable of accomplishing. In the same way that Mulan fails in her meeting with the matchmaker, Mushu failed at protecting the family. When the princess meets with the town's marriage arranger, she incorrectly pours the tea, shares the incorrect responses and wreaks havoc in the building. Similarly, Mushu is unable to protect the ancestors and embarrasses the family, resulting in his occupation as merely an accessory or assistant to the other family spirits.

Mushu further represents and highlights Mulan's feelings of inadequacy and discontentment. He desires to be taken seriously and given another chance in the same way that Mulan longs for acceptance and the ability to become what her family wants her to be. Mushu represents Mulan and her continuous struggle to be accepted. Like Mulan, the little red dragon fails and is a disappointment by traditional standards. His presence functions as an elaboration of the inner conflict within Mulan and highlights the constant struggle that accompanies feelings of inferiority and neglect. The two together go on a journey of discovery and enlightenment as they both help each other accomplish what they set out to do- Mulan to serve in the Emperor's army as a man to save her father's life and Mushu to protect her from harm's way. The two "outcasts" showcase the inner thoughts and traits of one another in a creative way that makes the message clear and easy to follow.

The "lucky" cricket, that we later find out is not lucky at all, showcases how little luck has to do with Mulan and her success. Instead, this little creature portrays how Mulan simply needs to believe in herself to obtain success. This is highlighted in the

beginning when the Grandmother “blindly” crosses the street relying on the power of the “lucky” cricket. The cricket is a scared, timid, little creature that hides his eyes and shakes in his little cage while being carried across the busy roadway. He is not confident in himself, but instead, the grandmother is confident in her ability as they successfully cross the street. We see a similar situation with Mulan. Mulan is scared and terrified at first, like the cricket. But, when trying times present themselves, she rises to the occasion and believes in herself and ultimately finds success in battle as she saves the Empire from destruction at the end of the movie.

Mulan’s horse is a loyal and sturdy creature that she relies on throughout the film. The horse is a constant source of support that is always accompanying the protagonist while she is serving in the military. He showcases that dependability and perseverance are important when working through a situation. This link can clearly be seen when Mulan single handedly defeats a Hun group by following her gut and using her natural intelligence. She refuses to follow the demand to fire directly at the enemy leader, and instead observes her surroundings and uses the final cannon to set off an avalanche so her group can escape safely. An instance of her perseverance is also seen at the end of the film. When Mulan discovers that the enemy is still alive and planning an attack, despite being let go from the service, she still works to defend the nation and ultimately saves the day. In this moment we see Mulan contribute fully to society as she uses her intuition to make remarkable progress and change that ultimately is responsible for the nation’s success.

Because Mulan is able to save the empire at the end of the film, dressed and acting as a traditional female, she makes a strong and powerful message for women

worldwide. She showcases that tradition does have some value; however, following one's heart and acting on one's own accord is extremely important when approaching or embracing a new situation. By closely considering her relationship with Mushu, I conclude that she is a woman of great growth and potential, which she reaches. Mulan pushes the envelope and provides an example of a strong, independent woman who defies the odds, saves the empire, and establishes her own standard for herself.

Mulan represents the internal conflict of many women in the late 1990s as she attempts to balance her femininity with her strength and abilities. In this film, Mulan, like many women of the late 1990s is able to accomplish her ultimate goal while wearing traditionally feminine clothing. Interestingly, the film, *G.I. Jane*, that addresses the role of women in the military released in 1997, showing how this animated classic is reflective of topical women's issues, particularly in regards to the military. This showcases how the princess is reflective of women of the period who are capable of keeping their feminine identity while tackling difficult issues that are seen as outside of the domestic or stereotypically feminine sphere. I argue that this is an instance of feminists embracing femininity. This serves as a stark contrast and a monumental marker of advancement as the Disney Corporation is having a woman ultimately defend her nation in the military while wearing traditional dress. In fact, Mulan uses her femininity as a tool to manipulate and ultimately gain success as her opponent simply viewed her as a fulfilling a traditional role. Women in the late 1990s were able to demonstrate their abilities and talents while embracing and celebrating their natural characteristics.

Later Films (2000-present)

Within the last five years the Disney Corporation has produced their most progressive and strong female characters. I argue that this is a reflection of the current status of women as society has reached a point in which independent, confident women are not only tolerated but celebrated. These feminist models need very little support from anthropomorphized creatures; instead, these women are profound developments in the Disney collection.

Brave (2012)

Walt Disney's feature film, *Brave*, is based on the story of a spunky, opinionated, young woman who dreams of following her heart. A quintessential tom-boy, Merida rejects typical roles of femininity in this work. Refusing to "act like a lady" and conform to the expected norms of behavior, she prefers activities such as archery and outdoor exploration to mastering rules and other feminine techniques such as household organization, tapestry, and manners. Receiving constant scrutiny from her mother, the young princess, in a quest for acceptance, decides to ask a witch to help change her mother. She gives Merida a tart and to her surprise, after consuming the treat, her mother turns into a bear. The story follows the tale of the two women in their struggle to understand themselves, the spell, and ultimately each other.

Merida is the strongest and most successful woman in the work. She advocates for herself and is not afraid to combat men and political positions. This is clearly seen when she states how she only will marry for true love. She advocates for herself in a way that is not common as she goes against the expectations of all other characters; she refuses to conform or marry for traditional reasons. Instead, she insists on marrying only for true

love and a lifelong connection. At the end of the film, she is not in a relationship and seems to have rejected the idea of marrying all together.

Merida's mother, the queen, serves as a stark contrast to her behaviors. In this work, the mother figure showcases the idea of the traditional woman. This character represents the attitude of most women in this film's period. She felt compelled to oblige to the culture at large. The mother as a human being is an extension of who she is supposed to be by cultural standards. She is known for her sewing skills, calm demeanor, ability to control and maintain a well-run household, and patience with her husband and unruly children. She is presented with respect and admiration. This shows respect for the women of the past who made great sacrifices for their families and in this case her country.

In this piece, the women are not accompanied by anthropomorphized animal counterparts; instead, the mother physically turns into the animal that is closely associated with Merida. When the mother becomes a bear, the two begin to operate as each other's double. Initially, in the same manner that Merida rejects traditional ideas; the mother bear rejects the wild and free lifestyle they lead on their journey to find a cure for her condition. She is seen attempting to wear her tiara while maintaining poise and lady-like tendencies despite living in the woods as bear. However, as the film progresses, the two slowly begin to accept and appreciate each other. The mother slowly is mentally transformed into a bear and Merida gradually begins to appreciate the traditional respect that her mother has attempted to enforce throughout her life. This is most clearly seen when the mother bear goes fishing toward the end of the film. She no longer tries to use her hands or other tools but instead embraces her bear characteristics and is seen catching

fish with her mouth. Similarly, when Merida believes that her mother is gone she fully understands the sacrifices her mother made for her and appreciates the hard work and position she occupies. In this moment, we see the mother adapting the free, spunky spirit exemplified by Merida while, in turn, Merida grows in gratitude and further understanding of her mother and the reasoning behind her actions. The physical transformation is a clear departure from earlier Disney pieces that is significant because the Queen is not accompanied by an animal but instead fully changes into the creature that is an addition to her characterization. I argue that this is due to society's recognition of the potential strength of women. Audiences were prepared for the strong evolution of an individual that maximized animal assistance without being consistently dependent on the presence of the creature throughout the entire film.

An important symbolic moment in the work is at the end of the piece when the mother is transformed back into a human being. Merida accepts and embraces the traditional ideas of the past by discovering that the tapestry, a traditional feminine product, is the key to reversing the spell. In wrapping her mother, as the bear, in the cloth, she is in fact unifying the two worlds and ultimately showing her appreciation and understanding of the situation. This moment showcases the merging of traditional and modern ideals and balances ideas regarding womanhood and the sacrifices that accompany while highlighting the liberation of a modern and free-spirited individual. The movie has respect for the women of the past and the ways in which they navigated these oppressive stances while celebrating the liberation for which Merida advocates.

This film highlights the attitudes of many women in the twenty first century who are attempting to balance appreciation for traditional customs with modern opportunities.

Many have great respect for the work and approaches of their past models but look to the future and take on the stance of a modern, independent and successful woman. Many women in the 21st century are open to the idea of not marrying, and if one so chose, they only desire to marry for love. This is the attitude held by Merida in the work and highlights the transformation regarding expectations for women. Interestingly, this idea is previously presented in *Mulan* as she too chooses to the end work unwed.

Frozen (2013)

Walt Disney's latest animated film, *Frozen*, has captivated the attention of audiences nationwide. Initially, the film was perceived by many as a typical Disney production about a princess fighting an evil snow queen; however, *Frozen* is the most progressive film in the Disney collection as it contains instances of strong female leadership and examples of gender equality without requiring the use of animals to further develop the strengths of the female protagonists, Anna and Elsa. The work highlights the societal shift to accepting and appreciating strong female leadership by utilizing characters that are successful and overcome their own obstacles without major male assistance.

The story opens revealing that Elsa, the future queen, possesses wintery powers that while wonderful, may also be harmful. When she accidentally harms her little sister, her parents, afraid of her abilities, lock her up and cause extreme emotional damage. Her little sister, Anna, unaware as to why she is no longer present, is left lonely and distraught. Only desiring the companionship of her sister, this young woman repeatedly attempts to rekindle her relationship with her sister. On the night of Elsa's coronation ball, Elsa's powers are revealed and for fear of rejection, she flees the town and

establishes an icy kingdom. The piece chronicles Anna's journey to save not only her sister but also their kingdom and ends with an ultimate demonstration of sisterly love and self-sacrifice.

In the work, the presence of the snowman Olaf serves as an incredibly interesting character. At first, one may interpret his presence as the traditional anthropomorphized creature in a Disney film; however, I argue that he does not. The princesses created the snowman and ultimately gave him life, making him a solid example of the power and capability of the women in the movie. Olaf is present in the film and serves as an image of comic relief throughout the piece and while he adds an interesting dimension to the work, ultimately, his presence does not serve as an extension of the princesses' characterization. The snowman has his own unique personality and desires. This is clearly seen in the piece when he states that he dreams of one day experiencing the season of summer. His quirky attitude and loveable demeanor while a positive reflection of Elsa's creation abilities are not directly related to her characterization. I argue that this is because the Disney Corporation has reached a point in which the animal counterpart is not necessary to develop strong female characters in the pieces. As a society, we have reached a point that strong, independent women appear on screen without assistance from supporting characters. Elsa knows what she wants and is not afraid to create her own future and ultimate success or happiness. Interestingly, the only animal counterpart in the piece is a comical reindeer that serves as Kristoff's right-hand man. I argue that this placement is remarkable as this highlights the transformation of gender roles and expectations.

One of the main positive messages that may be drawn from this work is the importance of celebrating physical differences and embracing the gifts that each individual possesses. Elsa, the new Queen of Arendelle, initially is ashamed of her difference and her powers. She is embarrassed to have a unique skill and is told by her parents that her powers are something to be feared and concealed. The work chronicles her internal struggle and points out the importance of celebrating and appreciating the differences of others. The negative results of oppressing gifts is highlighted through the internal struggle, pain, and isolation felt by Elsa in the beginning and middle of the work, and the good that comes from accepting and celebrating each individual's strengths at the end when the sisters are living in harmony and ruling the kingdom using Elsa's powers to promote good.

Many traditional fairytale elements are mocked in this Disney piece. The quintessential love at first sight element is poked at throughout the work as Hans Prince of the Southern Isles and Anna's relationship is questioned and rejected by all parties in the work. They poke fun at the idea of marrying someone right away and question Anna for agreeing to marry Hans after only one encounter. Elsa, Anna's sister, refuses to endorse such an irresponsible and impulsive life choice, which ultimately begins their major disagreement and separation. Throughout the work, other characters, including Kristoff, a merchant who accompanies Anna on her search for Elsa, also criticize her choice to consider entering into a union without having a substantial relationship. This is clearly seen in the film, while they are hiking through the snow, and he is incredibly surprised by her choice to marry a man that she just met. The absurd nature of marrying an individual on impulse is exemplified later in the work when Hans's true motives are

revealed. Hans turns on Anna and is only after her money and power; he has no desire for a serious partnership. This stark contrast to the earlier Disney films marks a turn in societal expectations regarding dating and marriages. Interestingly, the strength of the women in the piece is showcased as Hans, the Prince Charming character, is the villain.

At the end of the work, Anna and Kristoff share a kiss and presumably a relationship begins. Due to their status difference as Anna is a princess and Kristoff is from the working class, this union advocated for the breaking down of traditional restrictions on relationships and fully embraced the idea held in the 21st century that individuals choose their partners for love and shared values, not status and societal expectations. This is empowering as it advocates for positive relationships that promote personal growth rather than financial or societal growth. This is an interesting distinction from other Disney films as in this moment, the two appear to be together yet a marriage or future plans are not assumed. Unlike other Disney films, this instance provides a fresh perspective introduces the idea of dating in Disney films, opposed to the traditional fairytale view in which two individuals instantly falls in love.

Elsa, the Queen, never chooses to marry and never enters into a relationship at any point in the film. She rules the kingdom without the assistance of a male and her qualifications to rule (before her special powers are revealed) are never questioned. After she flees, her little sister, Anna, becomes the primary ruler- showcasing how the power in this society is yielded primarily by women. Hans attempts to gain control and fails, highlighting the power of the women and their vast influence on the citizens of their kingdom.

An important distinction between Elsa and other Disney heroines is her unmatched confidence in her abilities. She is aware that she is capable of ruling the kingdom and it is only her hidden powers and the fear of harming others that frighten this young woman. She is a driven, intelligent being who knows she is capable of running a kingdom and ultimately learns to control her powers and overcome the adversity that comes from her fear within herself. Elsa feels confident and comfortable creating her own happiness, as showcased through her behaviors when she builds her own ice castle. While singing the hit song, "Let it Go," this protagonist conquers the struggle to conform and accepts her true identity while embracing her full power and independence.

This piece highlights the strength of women by having the two sisters essentially save each other with minimal assistance from outside forces. After Anna's heart is accidentally frozen by her sister Elsa, Kristoff discovers that an act of true love is necessary to save her. Kristoff assumes this would be a kiss from Hans and he takes her to him in an attempt to save her life. However, it is Anna's self-sacrifice to save the life of her sister that in turn saves herself while showing Elsa that love and happiness are the keys to controlling her special wintery powers. Both women are strong, confident, and kind individuals who are capable of doing great things, therefore serving as strong and respectable role models for girls.

All of the above elements highlight the current gender climate in western 21st century society. Women celebrate the liberation that is associated with being single and are comfortable holding leadership positions. Their abilities are no longer questioned due to their gender but instead women are seen as capable, intelligent, and dependable individuals who can and will accomplish challenging tasks. Like Anna, the modern

woman is open to relationships yet does not allow them to define her as she prioritizes her own success and happiness over attempting to fill a certain mold. The ideal woman portrayed in this film is a confident, driven, intelligent, kind, and loving person who is not afraid to stand up for what she believes and always advocates for following her own heart in regard to her dreams, ambitions, relationships, and goals.

Conclusion

The Disney princess films important cultural artifacts when one considers the gender stereotypes, particularly roles of women, over the course of the last seventy years. I argue that the princesses in each of these films are positive role models of women who have slowly yet effectively challenged the gender restrictions of the past while advocating for equality and ultimate success for women. Snow White resembles the flapper and hardworking attitude necessary in the 1930s, Cinderella maintains a positive attitude for self-preservation, Pocahontas pushes societal expectations to advocate for herself, Merida refuses to conform to traditional expectations, and Anna and Elsa are strong confident women who are not afraid of success. Looking at the relationships between the princesses and the animals is important as these creatures serve as a crucial piece of evidence to the positive messages that viewers may deduce from the pieces. The animals highlight the strength, determination, spunk, and perseverance of the women in these pieces by advocating for their respective protagonist. Society has evolved to the point that these figures are no longer necessary and I predict that strong figures will continue to appear in Disney productions. This research is important to consider when one considers the Disney princesses as positive role models for women. As I have

evaluated, there is much evidence to indicate they are progressive images of women should be appreciated by modern audiences.

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